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FOR WHA/PDA (BYERS), WHA/AND (NARANJO, SHANNON)
NSC FOR WEINGOLD

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: KPAO, PREL, VE
SUBJECT: CODEL BALLENGER 4/27 DINNER WITH MEDIA OWNERS

1. CHAIRMAN CASS BALLENGER (R-NC) AND CONGRESSMAN WILLIAM DELAHUNT (D-MA) MET WITH FIVE MEDIA OWNERS FOR A 4/27 DINNER CONVERSATION OF GOVERNMENT-MEDIA RELATIONS. THE MEDIA OWNERS INCLUDED VICTOR FERRERES, PRESIDENT OF VENEVISION TV; GUILLERMO ZULOAGA, PRESIDENT OF GLOBOVISION TV; ENRIQUE CUZCO, PRESIDENT OF UNION RADIO; MIGUEL ENRIQUE OTERO, OWNER/EDITOR OF LEADING LIBERAL DAILY EL NACIONAL; AND MIGUEL ANGEL CAPRILES, OWNER OF THE CAPRILES GROUP OF POPULAR NEWSPAPERS ULTIMAS NOTICIAS AND EL MUNDO.

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THE CODEL'S MESSAGE

2. CONGRESSMAN DELAHUNT TOLD THE MEDIA OWNERS THAT THE U.S. WAS OPPOSED TO ANY DISRUPTION OF CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT AND WOULD CONDEMN ANY COUP, OPEN OR DISGUISED, AIMED AT OUSTING CHAVEZ. BOTH CONGRESSMEN ENCOURAGED THE MEDIA TO CONTRIBUTE TO A CLIMATE THAT WOULD MAKE POSSIBLE THE DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION THAT PRESIDENT CHAVEZ HAS CALLED FOR. CONG. DELAHUNT SAID THAT HE WAS CONCERNED THAT, WHILE CHAVEZ IS SINCERE IN HIS DESIRE FOR A NEW START, MANY IN THE OPPOSITION SEEM COMPLETELY CLOSED TO THE POSSIBILITY OF DIALOGUE. HE AGREED THAT CHAVEZ'S MANAGEMENT HAD BEEN

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INADEQUATE THUS FAR BUT ATTRIBUTED PART OF THE PROBLEM TO CHAVEZ'S "POLITICAL IMMATURITY," ADDING THAT "HE HAS GROWN UP" SINCE APRIL 11. DELAHUNT NOTED THE ABSENCE OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE LOOTING AND PRO-CHAVEZ DEMONSTRATIONS ON 4/12-4/13 AND SAID THIS APPEARED TO INDICATE OVERT PARTIALITY ON THE PART OF THE MEDIA. DELAHUNT URGED THE MEDIA OWNERS TO USE THEIR INFLUENCE TO SUPPORT THE TRUTH COMMISSION AND BUILD CONFIDENCE IN VENEZUELAN JUDICIAL INSTITUTIONS.

THE MEDIA: OPPOSITION? CARMONA SUPPORTERS?

3. THE MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES ARGUED THAT "THE MEDIA IS DEMOCRATIC" AND WERE OPPOSED TO ANY COUP. THEY STATED THAT MOST MEDIA HAD SUPPORTED CHAVEZ, OR AT LEAST THE CHANGE PROMISED BY CHAVEZ, THREE YEARS AGO. BUT BECAUSE MEDIA
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COVERAGE REPORTS NEGATIVE REALITIES SUCH AS THE DIRE ECONOMIC SITUATION, THE GOV HAD BECOME CONVINCED THAT THE MEDIA ITSELF WAS THE ENEMY. GLOBOVISION NOTED THAT AT A 4/13 MEETING WITH INTERIM PRESIDENT CARMONA, THE MEDIA STRONGLY DENOUNCED THE INTERIM GOVERNMENT'S MOVE TO CLOSE THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY AND ARREST CHAVEZ SUPPORTERS - AND CARMONA'S DEFENSE MINISTER ACCUSED THEM OF BEING "OPPOSED" TO THE INTERIM GOVERNMENT.

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THE QUESTION OF THE GOV'S DEMOCRATIC NATURE

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5. THE BROADCASTERS TOLD OF A 4/10 MEETING BETWEEN TV REPRESENTATIVES WITH VICE PRESIDENT CABELLO AND DEFENSE MINISTER RANGEL IN WHICH THE GOV COMPLAINED THAT THE MEDIA, BY SPLITTING SCREEN COVERAGE OF GOV OFFICIALS AND ONGOING STREET EVENTS, WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE LARGE ANTI-GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATIONS. CABELLO, SAID GLOBOVISION, WARNED THEM, "YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE BLOOD THAT WILL BE SHED." GLOBOVISION SAID IT REJECTED THE VICE PRESIDENT'S WORDS, REMINDING HIM THAT IT WAS THE GOV THAT WAS CALLING FOR PEOPLE TO GO TO MIRAFLORES TO CONFRONT OPPOSITION MARCHES.

COVERAGE OF 4/12-4/13: DID THE MEDIA LOSE CREDIBILITY?

6. THE MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES DISMISSED ALLEGATIONS THAT THEIR COVERAGE OF EVENTS AFTER CHAVEZ'S FALL HAD BEEN POLITICALLY BIASED OR WOULD CAUSE LASTING DAMAGE TO MEDIA CREDIBILITY. UNION RADIO NOTED THAT IT PROVIDED BALANCED

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COVERAGE DURING THE CRITICAL DAYS FOLLOWING THE CHAVEZ FALL, INCLUDING SPECIAL INTERVIEWS WITH VICE PRESIDENT CABELLO AND VARIOUS PRO-CHAVEZ FIGURES. HOWEVER, ACCURATE COVERAGE OF EVENTS IN THE STREETS WAS IMPEDED, THEY SAID, BY THE VIOLENCE AND THREATS OF VIOLENCE DIRECTED AGAINST THE JOURNALISTS THEMSELVES. (COMMENT: SIX CAMERAMEN WERE SHOT, ONE FATALITY, ON 4/11; THE MEDIA BELIEVE THAT JOURNALISTS WERE SPECIFICALLY TARGETED. END COMMENT.) THEY ALSO NOTED THAT THEIR JOURNALISTS WERE FRIGHTENED TO COVER PRO-CHAVEZ EVENTS BECAUSE THEY THEMSELVES WERE TARGETS, A QUITE DIFFERENT SITUATION FROM MERELY COVERING A POTENTIALLY

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DANGEROUS EVENT. VENEVISION REPORTED THAT ONLY 5 OF ITS NORMAL COMPLEMENT OF 18 REPORTERS DARED GO OUT TO COVER EVENTS ON 4/13 AND 4/14. THE TV STATIONS ALSO FACED BOLIVARIAN CIRCLES SURROUNDING THEIR INSTALLATIONS AND PREVENTING THEIR CAMERA CREWS FROM LEAVING THE GROUNDS, THEY SAID.

7. UNION RADIO SAID IT HAD SHOWN APPROPRIATE PROFESSIONAL CAUTION BY REFRAINING FROM BROADCASTING UNCONFIRMED REPORTS DURING THE UNREST, SUCH AS THE PURPORTED DEATH OF MAYOR FREDDY BERNAL - RUMORS, EVENTUALLY PROVEN FALSE, WHICH INTERNATIONAL MEDIA SUCH AS CNN DID TRANSMIT. A NEWSPAPER OWNER - WHOSE PUBLICATIONS ARE CONSIDERED PRO-CHAVEZ - NOTED THAT HIS ENTIRE REPORTER STAFF HAD ASKED THAT THE NEWSPAPER'S LOGO BE REMOVED FROM CARS TO REDUCE THE CHANCE OF ATTACKS FROM CHAVEZ SUPPORTERS.

BOTH SIDES TRY TO CENSOR COVERAGE OF LOOTING

8. THE MEDIA STATED THAT CARMONA'S DEFENSE MINISTER HAD ASKED THEM TO REFRAIN FROM TELEVISIONING STREET VIOLENCE ON 4/13, FEARING THAT SUCH COVERAGE WOULD ONLY INCITE ADDITIONAL VIOLENCE. THE BROADCASTERS STATED THAT DURING THE 1989 CARACAZO, WHEN TV DID TRANSMIT IMAGES OF LOOTING, THE VIOLENCE INCREASED, AND TELEVISION COVERAGE HAD SUBSEQUENTLY BEEN MUCH CRITICIZED. BUT WHEN CHAVEZ HAD BEEN REINSTATED, THEY SAID, DEFENSE MINISTER RANGEL MADE THE SAME
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REQUEST NOT TO TRANSMIT IMAGES OF UNREST ON 4/14.

9. THE MEDIA AGREED THAT THE 4/12-4/13 COVERAGE MAY HAVE

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BEEN MISTAKEN IN SOME RESPECTS. BUT ONE TV DIRECTOR SAID, "WE HAVE BUILT UP A GREAT SAVINGS ACCOUNT OF CREDIBILITY OVER THE YEARS THAT ONE DAY'S MISTAKE CANNOT ERASE." THEY THOUGHT THAT MEDIA CREDIBILITY MIGHT BE SLIGHTLY DAMAGED, FOR A SHORT TIME, BUT NOTED THAT THE MEDIA ARE STILL THE MOST TRUSTED INSTITUTION IN VENEZUELA, ACCORDING TO OPINION POLLS.

WHAT NEXT?

10. VENEVISION'S DIRECTOR NOTED, NOT HAPPILY, "YOU'RE ASKING US TO GIVE CHAVEZ ANOTHER CHANCE." ALL THE MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES AGREED THAT THEY WERE MAKING SUCH AN EFFORT BUT WERE VERY SKEPTICAL THAT CHAVEZ COULD SUSTAIN A CONCILIATORY APPROACH FOR VERY LONG. ONE DIRECTOR SAID THAT THERE WERE YEARS OF EVIDENCE JUSTIFYING SKEPTICISM TOWARD CHAVEZ'S CALL FOR RECONCILIATION. THEY RECALLED THAT ON THE MORNING OF 4/14, CHAVEZ ADMITTED ERRORS AND CALLED FOR FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION - BUT THAT AFTERNOON GAVE A FIERY SPEECH TO SUPPORTERS DEMANDING THAT THOSE RESPONSIBLE, INCLUDING THE MEDIA, MUST PAY. THEY ALSO SAID THAT CHAVEZ IS HIS OWN WORST ENEMY, AND THAT WHAT HAPPENS OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS IS ENTIRELY CHAVEZ'S RESPONSIBILITY.

11. TWO REPRESENTATIVES SAID THEY HAD FROM "VERY GOOD
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SOURCES" THAT MANY OF CHAVEZ'S STEPS ARE BEING DIRECTED BY THE MILITARY. TWO SPECIFIC POINTS, THEY SAID, WERE THAT CHAVEZ MUST NOT AGAIN WEAR HIS UNIFORM AND THAT HE MUST DISARM THE BOLIVARIAN CIRCLES. ONE COMMENTED, "WE HEAR THAT THIS IS MORE THAN A SUGGESTION." VENEVISION SAID THAT CHAVEZ WAS NOW SENDING GOOD AND BAD SIGNALS. THE GOOD: REINSTATING THE PDVSA PROFESSIONAL MANAGERS, AND INVITING MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES TO LUNCH. THE BAD: MVR LEADERS HAVE ACCUSED MEDIA FIGURES AND THE AMBASSADOR AS BEING BEHIND THE COUP. (NOTE: CONATEL HAS ANNOUNCED INVESTIGATIONS OF THE COMMERCIAL TV STATIONS AND THEIR COVERAGE OF THE EVENTS OF 4/11-4/14. END NOTE.)

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13. CODEL BALLENGER DID NOT HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO REVIEW
THIS MESSAGE.

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